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ABSTRACT

One of the most popular innovations in learning community programs involves paired or clustered courses. The demonstrated ability of paired courses to enhance student retention and performance levels has contributed to their growth on campuses across the country. However the development of paired courses presents instructors with unique obstacles in organization and presentation. This paper examines issues related to a paired course developed in English composition and general sociology grounded in Erving Goffman's frame analytic approach. The courses consisted of three sections of English composition linked to one general sociology course. Eight instructors were involved in developing the paired courses. The mechanism used to implement this approach was a student journal, which served to establish a mutual focus for students and instructors. The journal format consisted of four entries per week, and students were required to take any concept or idea presented in the sociology course and relate it to an experience outside the classroom. The study found that the journal, used as a framing device, connected aspects of the paired courses into one assignment that was relevant to all participants, and also enhanced student understanding of the material. (JM)

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FRAME ANALYSIS AND THE PROBLEMS OF PAIRED COURSE DEVELOPMENT

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One of the most popular innovations in learning community programs involves paired or clustered courses. The demonstrated ability of paired courses to enhance student retention and performance levels has contributed to their growth on campuses across the country. However, the development of paired courses presents instructors with unique obstacles in organization and presentation of course material. This paper examines issues related to a paired course developed in english composition and general sociology. Erving Goffman's frame analytic approach is presented as a means for approaching the problems of paired course development and student assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The learning community effort underway at colleges across the country represents a collective effort to restructure the learning process traditionally used in post-secondary education. In general, a learning community involves restructuring the curriculum to link together courses or course work such that students find greater coherence in what they are studying and experience increased intellectual interaction with faculty members and their peers. A variety of curriculular models have been used such as linked courses (separate courses that attempt to connect common issues), clusters (common theme used in two or more classes), freshmen interest groups (cohort clusters of students), and coordinated studies (year long integrated programs of study) (Smith 1991).

These learning community models and others like them represent attempts to restructure the educational curriculum and thereby enhance students educational experience (MacGregor 1990). Each is fraught with problems as are the attempts to restructure any aspect of social life. There are administrative dilemmas over scheduling courses, sequencing enrollments, and tracking

students; instructor dilemmas over collaborative teaching methods, preserving course content, and assessing student performance; and, student dilemmas over satisfying two or more instructors who are trying to overlap course content. This paper focuses on one type of learning communities model - the linked or paired course - and how a team of instructors attempted to deal with the dilemmas of restructuring two courses. The courses consisted of three sections of english composition linked to one general sociology course. The courses were scheduled in back-to-back sequencing for flexible meeting. All students in the english composition courses were also enrolled in the sociology course, but non-linked students were allowed to enroll in the sociology course (about 10 percent of approximately 100 students). The University scheduled two of these linked courses for the same term, and thus, a total of eight instructors (six from english and two from sociology) were involved in developing the paired courses described above.

Of concern to the instructors in the paired courses were the following questions: How to merge course content? (teacher-to-teacher collaboration); How to help students connect course material? (teacher-to-student collaboration); and, How to assess student performance? (teacher-to-teacher-to-student collaboration). As might be expected, the instructors were separated in terms of their learning objectives and methods of delivery. The english composition instructors cited the need for assignments that would develop writing proficiency and the ability to formulate different types of writing strategies (from description and narrative to analysis and evaluation). The sociology instructors wanted students to master core concepts and theoretical frameworks as they applied to central issues in sociology (from socialization and interaction processes to inequality and institutional arrangements). Along with course content, the instructors were separated, though not necessarily opposed, on

issues related to teaching methods (discussions versus lectures), class size (small versus large) and assessment procedures (written assignments versus objective exams). These differences represented obstacles for linking the courses and developing collaborative teaching methods as well as potential problems for students.

The problem was initially approached using the traditional model for linked courses. That is, two autonomous courses that are restructured to provide an element of common content for students through the implementation of readings, assignments, presentations, etc. After several rounds of discussion, an attempt was made to select text books that carried a somewhat similar theme -- identities in social life. However, this in itself did little to resolve or even approach the concerns noted earlier. It did not fully address issues of common content nor did it address problems related to modes of deliver or assessment.

At an early meeting during the teacher-to-teacher collaborative process, one of the sociology instructors, whose training included social psychology and identity management, brought a proposal to the group. The proposal involved not developing common content to connect the courses, but rather, injecting an element of common structure that would link the paired courses. The proposal was grounded in the frame analytic approach developed by Erving Goffman (1974) and the mechanism to implement the approach was the student journal. Following a few comments on Goffman's theory, the remainder of this paper discusses how the student journal was developed and used to link these paired courses. We conclude by noting the utility of Goffman's approach for developing paired or linked courses within learning communities.

THE FRAME ANALYTIC APPROACH

Erving Goffman's development of frame analysis represents a theory for the

analysis of social interaction that examines how reality is structured through ritualistic performances (Goffman 1974; 1981). Goffman's work was influenced by such diverse theorists as John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Emile Durkheim (Collins 1988). The major thread that connects his writings is an interest in how the elements of everyday encounters structure social order. Our emphasis in this paper will focus on those aspects of Goffman's work that are relevant to the issues/problems noted above.

Those who have a passing knowledge of Erving Goffman's work are most familiar with his early development of the dramaturgic model and the presentation of the self in everyday life (Goffman 1959; 1967). Here we find actors staging performances through roles that are carefully crafted to manipulate audience reactions. However, as Goffman points out in his later work, this interpretation of his theory is only a surface reading -- popular as it might be (Goffman 1974). His real interest lies in understanding the social processes that provide the structure for staged performances (Goffman 1981). We may begin by formulating his notion of the self.

The self represents the core of the individual. It can be defined as the individual as known to the individual in a socially determined frame of reference. As this definition illustrates, the self consists of a mental state, but not one that is derived from nor sustained within the individual. Rather the self emerges and is transformed through interaction with others in a social context. The self is a process in the sense that the it acts upon the world, interpreting messages, planning action, and directing the behaviors of person and other. It also is an object for the individual as when we rehearse actions mentally, reflect on past behaviors, or project ourselves into one of the many social positions that we occupy. This dual nature of the self can be understood in several ways. For example, the desire to maintain self esteem can motivate action while the

perceived response from others can be evaluated and used to shape self esteem. The self as process and object is further broken down within interaction when situations demand that only particular aspects of the self are pertinent and to be projected. Thus, the self is malleable. However, it is the situational expectations of an encounter that determine and structure the type of self that a person will project.

How a situation structures the self and elicits the various identity components that will be presented to others can be understood through rituals. For Goffman, all social encounters proceed through rituals (Goffman 1967). A ritual begins when individuals are assembled in an encounter that has a mutually aware focus of attention and invokes common understandings and emotions (Collins 1988). The consequences of ritual interactions are that they shape the subsequent behavior, thought and feelings of those who participate in them. A type of social pressure is brought to bear on participants that guides action and emotions and shapes the symbolic meaning of objects as well. Hence, along with symbolizing inanimate objects, rituals provide symbolic meaning to participants and organizes the presentation of self. In this way, the ritual produces a type of meaning framework which participants use to interpret self and others (Goffman 1974). Rituals may be highly formal or quite casual, but for Goffman, they are a fundamental aspect of all situations. They provide a frame of reference for projecting the self and populating the encounter with symbolic meanings.

Critical to this process is that feature of the situation that participants rely on for their mutual focus. Goffman argues that when individuals enter into the presence of others they "key" on particular features of the interaction which constitutes the mutual focus for the ritual that emerges (Goffman 1981). Thus, keying is an activity or device that provides participants with mutual awareness.

Once a key is established, the unfolding of the ritual reflexively provides structure to the interaction. Moreover, by shifting keys, participants realign ritualistic behaviors and social meanings. This process provides a type of framework for interpreting the world and eliciting what facets of the self should be presented. It also structures the expectations participants uphold for themselves and others.

The interaction frame that emerges in a situation not only guides but also constrains behavior (Collins 1988). Goffman argues that social constraints are not encoded in the form of verbal prescriptions, but are something deeper. Social constraints are not rules or norms that people have learned to carry around in their heads, but are ways in which situations unfold, so that participants feel they have to behave in a certain way, or make amends for not doing so. Even when a frame is broken, the situation that emerges, a new frame, remains constraining in a predictably transformed way. The more formal the ritual, the more it will constrain the participants' behaviors and self presentations.

THE STUDENT JOURNAL AS A FRAMING DEVICE

Having presented this simplified, and perhaps broken, review of Goffman's approach, we want to bring things back to the topic at hand. Our goal in using the journal was to establish a mutual focus for students and instructors that also contained an element of ritualistic interaction. We approached the journal as a type of keying device which would establish a ritual and allow a common frame to emerge. In this way, a structural feature of the course would enable students to connect the course content.

The format of the journal consisted of four entries per week with each being one to two pages long. The entries required students to take any concept or idea presented in their sociology course and relate it to an experience outside

the classroom (e.g., life experience, movie, book, song, personal philosophy). The students were asked to organize their discussion of the topic and experience to reflect the writing strategy being presented in their english composition course. In addition, students were encouraged to ask questions or comment on the courses as they unfolded. The journals were taken up periodically by instructors for review and written comments. While each instructor focused their substantive comments on the journal content relevant to their course material, they also injected personal comments to the students, answered questions about the courses, and directed some responses to the comments written by their linked counterparts.

A decision was made to grade the journals from a non-penalty approach. That is, full credit was awarded for journals that followed the general guidelines and were kept up to date. This approach encouraged students to be open and allowed instructors to provide feedback and other comments in a less than formal manner. In short, it provided a way to not only assess student learning, but also, a means to interact with students in an informal manner. Thus, the journal's structure shifted the mutual focus from grades toward a less formal interaction. This keying aspect of the journal was critical in structuring a type of open interaction. For example, as the journals evolved over time, many of entries took the form of an ongoing dialogue with all three participants responding and interacting to the others comments. A type of interaction ritual emerged that formed a connecting link between both instructors and the student. In this way a type of backstage region to the course was established that created less formal constraints and more open, individualized forms of communication about the course content.

The student journal provided a keying device that structured mutual awareness for students and instructors. When students wrote in their journals,

they engaged in a ritualistic activity that, while not face-to-face interaction, represented a type of dialogue or interaction with both professors. Comments from the instructors provided a means to interact with students in a mutually focused context, and thus, a common reality was established that linked student and instructors. Moreover, by allowing students an element of autonomy in developing their journal entries without the threat of grades, the students were able inject more facets of their social lives into the situational self of being a student. By investing more aspects of their self into the activity, this latter aspect of the journal increased the students commitment to understanding related aspects of the course and promoted a stronger sense of attachment to their overall course work. It also provided a means for instructors from both courses to interact with each other and their students in a less formal manner.

CONCLUSIONS

Our experiences with the student journal provided a means to link courses not so much through content but through structure. The journal as a framing device connected aspects of the paired courses into one assignment that was relevant to all participants. It also provided a means to enhance student understanding of the material. Finally, the journal increased student involvement in the course by providing a keying device that connected students with their instructors in a mutually focused type of ritualistic interaction.

Faculty involved in linked course development are faced with the dilemma of maintaining distinct course content while developing overlapping, and sometimes new, content areas. Rather than focusing all resources toward isolating topics and lectures to draw out mutual content, faculty should devote equal attention to how overlapping areas are to be structured. This shifts the question from "what topics will be used to link paired courses," to "what devices

will be used to merge content." Our experiences indicate that instructors should rethink the rituals of the classroom situation which frame how instructors and students define themselves and their learning experiences. One of the more critical rituals to restructure involves the way paired courses are linked in the assessment of student performance. After all, the shift in structure and how the ritual activities of traditional courses are transformed to frame the paired course content is what learning communities are all about at all levels in the learning communities model from administrators to instructors to students.

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Biography

John Lynxwiler is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Central Florida. His primary teaching and research areas are social psychology and deviant behavior. For the past two years, he has participated in the University's LINC Program to develop collaborative courses with faculty in the English Department.